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Blurred Mirrors

Katie Brownlee

Maxine Hong Kingston's name is settled innocently just above the title of her short story "No Name Woman." The narrator is assumed to be Kingston herself, as the text was pulled from a larger collection of stories fitted together to create Kingston's autobiography. Not once in the dense pages, however, do letters ever string together to form the name of the author, or any other character, for that matter, hence the title: "No Name Woman." The nomenclature was not chosen coincidentally, but rather is used as part of Kingston's strategy to transform her narrative of a maturing, second generation immigrant possessing a fascination with the mystery of her aunt into a story that is full of depth and guidance and is relatable to every reader. Through the narrator's imagination leading to a recognition of self within her aunt's story, accompanied by the omission of character names, Kingston creates her own no name story to which readers can connect, and uses it to encourage readers to confront and combat the continuation of oppressive, customary gender roles so her desire for freedom and humanity for all can be realized.

Kingston's memoir begins with the narrator's recollection of the story of her aunt, as told by her mother, who releases only the bare minimum plot points of the aunt's story. Kingston writes: "In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she has never been born" (383). The mother also includes the fact that the aunt was pregnant out of wedlock, and consequently, the villagers cast a net of shame upon the woman and beat her family's house to a pulp (Kingston 383-385). The cropped information is shared with the sole purpose of terrifying the narrator into running miles away from her aunt's "rebellious" footsteps, and toward conformity to gender roles, as Kingston confirms when, from the stance of the mother, she declares, "What happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born" (385). The mother glues her mouth shut then, and the narrator does not ask

questions. However, the narrator also does not settle with solely the darkest part of her aunt's life uncovered. Instead, she moves on to piece together her aunt's story like a puzzle and build a life of human experiences out of the ash of the no name story.

Leading with the scraps her mother has laid out, the narrator embarks on her detective quest to know her aunt. The narrator is warned that her aunt conceived a child with a man who was not her husband (Kingston 383), and her first steps to solving the puzzle include imagining her aunt's relationship with the man, using guessing words: "perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain" (Kingston 390). The narrator furthers her investigation by figuring in speculations based on what she knows about the customs and culture of her aunt's time, reckoning that her aunt performed chores on the mountain and "always did as she was told" (Kingston 383). At this point, the narrator has established a basic framework of the story, and she dives into specifics of the affair as if she had been trembling alongside her aunt in the same moment: "the first night she saw him, he had sex with her" (Kingston 386). The narrator was not even alive at this point in time, yet she makes assertions as if they are the truth. Finally, the narrator goes beyond all limits and she steps into her aunt's mind, reading her thoughts: "When she tried to envision him, she only saw the black and white face in the group photograph" (Kingston 386). Kingston repeats the cycle of known facts, traditions, and guesses throughout the story, adding substance to the narrator's image of her aunt while slyly feeding the reader's suspicion of the tale created by the narrator.

In particular instances, the narrator takes her personal experiences and blends them with her aunt's story; as a result, Kingston proves to the reader that the gaps of the no name story are only filled due to the gender roles that have successfully transcended time and space into the narrator's own life. Towards the middle of the story, the narrator recounts a painstakingly distinct occasion of her aunt's life: "Once my aunt found a freckle on her chin, at a spot that the almanac said predestined her for unhappiness. She dug it out with a hot needle and washed the wound with peroxide" (Kingston 388). The recollection is so astonishingly specific, right down to the needlepoint, that the narrator could never have truly known whether it occurred or not, let alone have been aware of her aunt's reasoning and cognition throughout the event. She states the story as fact, regardless. Kingston has positioned this situation directly after a section dedicated

to the narrator's own experience with agonizing tactics to rise to beauty standards, as well as a story of her ancestors facing similar challenges (388). Thus, Kingston reveals that the narrator's window to her aunt's life is found in the form of a mirror, as the narrator feels the same pain as hairs are ripped from her skin (388); exhibits the same longing gazes at boys (390); and demonstrates the same self-deprecating fixation with her beauty (390). Just as her ancestors were trapped within their gender roles, the narrator's mother bends down to impose beauty expectations and warnings of paths mistaken upon her daughters, and the narrator lives out the story. Through the connections leading back to herself, deep down the narrator knows that inevitably her aunt not only "might have," or "must have" (386), but did live the same story.

It isn't until the conclusion of the narrative, after much reflecting, that Kingston coaxes the reader into realizing that the narrator, herself, has been part of the perpetuation of the gender roles that oppress women. The narrator is disgusted with the destruction and death of her aunt, as evident by her attempt to give her aunt a chance at having existed for more than just a no name warning. She builds experiences for the woman that have been practically wiped off the face of the Earth. With the narrator's digging for humanity in the lost life, Kingston does encourage readers to fight back against the tradition of devaluing and disowning the shunned and the betrayers to please onlookers and satisfy the status quo. However, despite her empathy towards her aunt, the narrator admits regretting spending her whole life living by her aunt's warning and accepting her own fabricated version of her aunt's life as the truth (Kingston 393). It is not until very late in life that she realizes further courses of action that she could have taken to challenge her family's dehumanizing way of life: uncovering the truth and refusing to accept the gender roles as life rules (391). While Kingston's account rounds off with a melancholy ode to the continuation of superficial stories and oppressed ghosts, she also leaves the reader with a spark of hope. Through the narrator's regret, Kingston inspires readers to press beyond simply accepting warnings, adopting gender roles, and imagining humanity and actually take the leap towards discovering the truth, thus fulfilling the chance of change Kingston missed.

Kingston is, in effect, using her own no name story to liberate readers – not to haunt future generations into conforming to traditional gender roles, but to encourage readers to turn away from the customary social constructs before it is too late, and to discourage readers from

telling the suffocating no name stories themselves. Accompanying the narrator's self-reflection within her aunt's tragedy, Kingston incorporates the element of anonymity into her writing. Kingston establishes her characters with general familial titles, replacing names unique to the narrator's story with "aunt," "mother," "sister," "father," and "brother" (383). The removal of names provides a release of possession – an opportunity for readers to effortlessly fill in the blanks of the story with their own experiences, memories, and family. Instead of the story simply belonging to Kingston, it reflects every reader, male and female, who may recognize themselves in any one of the character's shoes. Through the story, readers are guided to developing a vicarious awareness of their own place within social constructs, and their role in perpetuating the traditions of gender oppression. Recognizing one's imprisonment in a life of paper will encourage the reader to steer his or her future down a path Kingston was not able to follow – demanding, telling, and creating stories full of life. To eradicate one's tendency to uphold the oppressive customs of the past through accepting and passing on no name stories will ultimately allow for Kingston's hopes of humanity and equality to flourish among all people.

Works Cited

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "No Name Woman." *The Best American Essays of the Century*, edited by Robert Atwan and Joyce Carol Oates, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000.